

Quebec candidates urge Scheer to step down; Concerns over leader's capabilities dominate Montreal meetings

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Byline: Tonda MacCharles Toronto Star

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Body

Andrew Scheer faced demands by several Quebec candidates to step down and let someone else lead the Conservative party at a no-holds-barred meeting Monday in Montreal.

And at another meeting next door, sources say, campaign directors made a show of hands to party officials expressing they no longer have confidence in Scheer.

The Star spoke to several sources with knowledge of the discussions that took place at the two private meetings, which were held in adjacent rooms at the Marriott Château Champlain in downtown Montreal. While most requested they not be identified in order to speak candidly about the discussions, some spoke on the record.

During the meeting with Scheer, which lasted 2 1/2 hours and was followed by a reception, defeated Montreal-area candidates laid out concerns ranging from logistical complaints about the Quebec campaign's operations and failures, to broader concerns that Scheer cannot win in Quebec in the next election.

Marie Claude Fournier, who ran in the riding of Thérèse-De Blainville on Montreal's north shore, told the Star in an interview that she told Scheer directly what she heard and continues to hear in her riding: that the party cannot win with Scheer at its top.

"I think that will take another leader, other than Andrew Scheer," Fournier said. "Andrew Scheer is a good person ... he's very attentive, but if I could speak for myself, and for my riding in Quebec, he's not the man for the job. He doesn't have the leadership of the troop. He doesn't understand Quebec."

Fournier said Scheer's anti-abortion views were not an issue - "those are his values, that's fine," she said, but added he "wasn't clear, wasn't authentic when it came to dismissing concerns over how he would deal with the issue in Parliament."

She said there were similar concerns with his position on climate change.

"Voters told us, 'He seems like a good guy, but I don't believe him,'" Fournier said.

She added that the firing of chief of staff Marc-André Leclerc, who had a key role in how the Quebec campaign ran, was "a bit too late" to salvage confidence in Scheer.

"Once people don't believe you, no matter what you do, they won't. It is too late," she said.

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"He's a good guy. He might be a good minister eventually in another cabinet. He's certainly a good member of Parliament, but for the next campaign ... he has to go.

"He has to step down."

François Derochers, a candidate in the Mirabel riding who attended the Scheer meeting, said that was the feeling of the majority in the room.

"The campaign in Quebec was a catastrophe," Desrochers said. "People like Andrew Scheer a great deal ... we'd like to work with him, but as leader, the message was clear that he cannot win Quebec."

Desrochers said that while Scheer's positions on social issues "stuck" to him, the concerns about his leadership were "larger and deeper."

One issue was Scheer's unwillingness to address climate change, or to even make the gesture of marching for climate action when there were half a million Quebecers demanding change at a Montreal march during the election.

He said the Conservative Party "hit a wall in Quebec," and that won't change unless the party and the leader recognize that voters there are looking for a progressive conservative option.

"If the Conservative party doesn't change, it will remain in the opposition or in a minority for the next 20 or 30 years," Desrochers said.

A spokesperson for Scheer said the conversations at the meeting were "frank" as concerns were aired, but said the discontent was not widespread and that many candidates indicated they were willing to run again for the party.

Next door to the gathering with Scheer, things were just as heated in a meeting of party officials.

One local campaign organizer reportedly asked for a show of hands of how many wanted Scheer to quit. Most raised their hands, according to three sources who were in direct communication with people in the room.

A senior Conservative source denied there was any "vote" or "show of hands" against Scheer, but did not deny that a Quebec organizer asked whether those in attendance should express how they felt about Scheer's leadership.

The Conservative source said others in the room dismissed the call for a show of hands, saying it wasn't the time or place and that a vote would be held at the party's national convention in April.

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